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Congress Shifts Toward Reagan On Aid for Contras in Nicaragua

FOREIGN INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—Few issues have posed tougher political difficulties for President Reagan than his aim of fostering greater Central American stability and keeping diplomatic and military heat on Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. Public opinion hasn't been a Reagan ally on the issue, and Congress frequently has been downright hostile.

But through it all Mr. Reagan has remained steadfast, nudging public opinion wherever possible, squeezing what he could out of Congress. In the process, he has managed to keep his policy alive, though sometimes just barely, and to remain in position to fight another day. Now, as he prepares for a new battle, Mr. Reagan's prospects may be brighter than last year.

Last spring, Congress, after a bitter struggle with the White House, approved $27 million in "humanitarian aid" for the Contra rebels fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. That aid expires on March 31, and the president and his top aides must decide what kind of renewed aid to seek.

Remarkably, the president's options, though still narrow, appear to have widened. The humanitarian aid, for which Mr. Reagan expended so much political capital last year, seems sure to be renewed. And many close to the scene, including some longtime presidential critics, think Mr. Reagan actually may get Congress to approve sending lethal military aid to the Contras.

Political Assets

"There's no doubt," says White House communications director Patrick Buchanan, "that Congress has shifted toward the president's position." That may reflect some of Mr. Reagan's political strengths—strong convictions, perseverence, deftness in keeping his aims alive in the face of potent opposition.

Mr. Reagan took office determined to play an activist role in Central America. His aims: to stabilize El Salvador, wracked by civil war and roving rightwing "death squads," and to curtail regional instability that the president believed was caused by Nicaragua's Sandinistas. While not actually calling for the Sandinistas' overthrow, "he comes very close," as one top aide puts it.

But polls consistently revealed Americans didn't want their country embroiled in the region. There were widespread fears of "another Vietnam" if the U.S. became too involved, and those fears found ample expression in Congress. "It was like pushing water uphill," recalls a top administration official.

First Mr. Reagan opted for covert military aid to the Contra rebels funneled through the Central Intelligence Agency. Congress killed that, and the president found his policy hanging by the thread of private Contra funding. Meanwhile, he waged a constant battle with Congress over aid to El Salvador, which he saw as a test of the region's ability to fend off leftist insurgencies.

Mixed Success

The turning point on El Salvador came in August 1984, when Congress approved a big Central American aid package that doubled military assistance to Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte's government. But the Contra-aid issue remained much more difficult.

Mr. Reagan unleashed a rhetorical blitz early last year in his effort to get restoration of military assistance to the Contras. He praised the Contra "freedom fighters" and blasted the Sandinista regime as a dangerous threat to the region and, eventually, to the U.S. itself. Still he was able to get only the "humanitarian aid" package—at the cost of considerable political capital.

But it turned out to be a kind of political beachhead from which Mr. Reagan may be able to press forward. Hardly anyone thinks the president will have much difficulty renewing that "nonlethal" aid this year. And some, including Rep. Robert Torricelli (D., N.J.), a longtime Reagan critic on the issue, suggest the president may actually have the votes for lethal aid this time.

That's speculative, as even White House officials concede. But the president "is fighting on an entirely different plane now," says one White House official, adding, "We're in substantially better shape on the Hill."

Sandinista Mistakes

There are numerous reasons for this, including the Sandinistas themselves. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's trip to Moscow last year was "utter stupidity" on his part, says a Washington lobbyist who has watched the issue closely. The Sandinistas' internal repression has also bolstered Mr. Reagan's rhetorical leverage. Not even his harshest critics speak kindly of the Sandinistas, whose actions have posed political difficulties for congressional liberals opposed to Contra aid. One Reagan ally says Mr. Ortega's Moscow visit "bought Reagan a year on the issue."

What's more, Mr. Reagan has forced his critics to defend a status quo that the president insists is inherently unstable. Liberals argue that Contra support almost inevitably will lead to U.S. military involvement in the region. But Mr. Reagan argues that withdrawing support leaves only two options—surrender or eventual military involvement.

That position has become harder to rebut as U.S. public attitudes toward the Sandinistas have turned increasingly sour. Thus, Mr. Reagan's perseverance may turn out to be the most important element in the dynamics surrounding the issue. "The president recognizes that Communists are in this for the long haul," says Mr. Buchanan, "and the idea of a quick victory isn't something that you can rightfully envision."